

Cara

BY GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN



I was when Martha was four and a half and Tommy three, that I first began to hear them talking about "Cara." That was a very busy year; my maids were troublesome and there were other anxieties, so I was unable to watch my children as I had supposed I always should. If any one had told me when they were at the creeping and staggering stage that by the time they were running I should let days go by without knowing what their minds were doing! Probably all mothers go through this surprise sooner or later.

At first I thought they had named one of their dolls "Cara." Then, as they still used the word when no dolls were about, I finally bent from my grown-up concerns to ask what it meant. They answered, readily enough, that she was their sister. Remembering the highly colored and solid imaginings of my own childhood, I took the announcement without great surprise, and forgot about it until one night when Martha insisted on having an extra pillow in her crib. As Martha was already somewhat of a crowd for her crib, this seemed rather a pity, but when I took away the pillow she turned belligerent, after her own singular methods.

"I'll frown at you," said she, and did so forthwith.

"But tell me why you want it, dear?" I entreated. Such strange things they think of every minute!

"You know!" she said, with a naughty thrust of her foot, an airy kick at me through the bars.

"But I don't know, dear," I wearily insisted. She wriggled away, stuck her fingers in her mouth, and said with a sidelong shadow of a smile, very low, "Cara!"

"Oh—the little sister?"

She nodded. So at that, of course,

there was nothing for it but to restore the pillow. And there had to be a toy under that pillow as well as under Martha's. When I went in after she was asleep her arm was cuddled over the pillow exactly as if it lay about a child's neck. After this I watched their "Cara" play a little, as I had time, and was amazed at the roots it had struck in their fancy, and at the vivid flowering of it.

Once I asked, doubtfully, whether they didn't mean Clara instead of Cara, but they were very emphatic about that. Cara, no other, was the name, and Cara it stayed.

Of course, one gets used to having invisible creatures about whenever children play, yet I confess that to see Martha coming down-stairs, one hand out as though grasping another child's hand, and talking, talking, talking to the little invisibility, it seemed carrying it rather far, and I wondered whether it were really wholesome, and if, after all, I ought to send them to a kindergarten. Yet they seemed so happy. There was never any quarreling in the "Cara" play, and before it began—well, I *had* been worried. I suppose it's always so when one child is just enough older and stronger than the other to hurt without meaning it.

Tommy was even more ingenuously brazen in his claims for Cara than Martha. She would never have done anything so inartistic as an assertion of his that Cara had made the circles with arms and legs over which I had seen him toiling. When he asked me, holding up the sheet, "Doesn't Cara make nice pictures?" Martha said, with contemptuous iconoclasm, "You made those yourself," whereat he sunk into puzzled silence, and turning his fat little back toward me, lifted his elbows, as a sign that he wanted to be taken into my lap and be comforted. At that elevation he drew me an engine, and successfully put Cara from



Drawn by Denman Fink

"DOESN'T CARA MAKE NICE PICTURES?"

his mind. In fact, he never seemed to understand her so well as Martha did, or to master the delicate rules of the game. Perhaps it was a masculine clumsiness and directness applied to a situation calling for endless feminine *finesse*. It seemed to be really Martha's game. I made many concessions: the extra pillow in the crib became a fixture, a third box of toys was added to the nursery and filled by contributions from Martha's and Tommy's, but at last I rebelled, on the day when they demanded that a new high-chair be purchased for Cara, so that she might sit with them at the table. They had a very poor opinion of the substitute which I offered of a dictionary in a grown-up chair, but when I had made it clear that Cara could expect nothing better, Martha sweetly abdicated her own chair and sat upon the dictionary.

"It's politer," she said, "because she's newer than I am."

But though they made no further reference to it, I fancy that either the refusal of their request, or—alas!—the manner of its refusal, had dampened their joy in the game; as if my lack of belief were a cold wind blowing through the airy fabric of their dream. At any rate, after this they repressed all mention of Cara when I was about, until, if I had not heard them talking about her, I should have thought her put by with other forgotten plays.

She had appeared on Christmas week along with the toys. When spring came she was still about the place, helping the babies to keep my borders quite free of crocusses and jonquils.

On the very day that Tommy was taken sick I saw—the three of them, I started to say—I saw Tommy and Martha running over the short spring grass, their arms stretched out toward each other as if each held the hand of a third child who ran between them. The pretense was wonderful; the way they turned their faces, laughing, not at each other, but at her.

Then came Tommy's sickness. We sent Martha to her grandmother's. There wasn't so very much to be done for him. I couldn't bear to have any one else take care of him. They kept telling me he would be better off with a trained

nurse, but I didn't believe it. *No!* Until—after several nights—when I knew I was giving out, I began to be afraid I might make mistakes.

It was on the fifth night that I cried. That was after the nurse came. So I went away and cried all I needed to.

I must have fallen asleep so, for I thought that Martha was in the room; that she touched my wet cheek with the tip of her finger, curiously, as if to see what made it so. Then I remembered that Martha was at her grandmother's, and woke. No child was in the room, yet in the instant of my eyelids lifting (or was it before they lifted?) I had surely seen a little face—not Martha's! A surprised, lovely little face, sweet, grave;—and a tiny, upraised finger glistened with the wetness from my eyes.

My first thought was of shame that I had been crying in the presence of a little child. That is something one should never, never do, no matter what the pain! And then I realized with relief that it had only been a dream. What else? And yet . . .

I was singularly calm and rested; reassured about Tommy without any reason that I knew for being so; and yet, though I did not dare acknowledge it to myself, I did know the reason, trembling at its little worth. For though there remained no more of the dream than the half-seen face of a strange child, and the flower-like touch of its hand, I knew that there had been more to it than that. What I was able to remember was only the dear conclusion of some wonderful thing that had gone before. And the touch upon my cheek persisted so! The dream of something felt is rare. Dreams are chiefly made up of vague reminiscences of sight and hearing, but this memory of the investigating little finger was as real as the stains of my dried tears.

I suppose mothers have been comforted by dreams since brains began to be human at all. Perhaps before—who knows? Who knows anything at all? Not scientific men with microscopes, nor magicians, nor the founders of great philosophies. No. There is just one little path that really leads between the living and the dead. Dreams walk there, and sometimes—not dreams.

If the learned men ever begin to question the mothers upon this subject, and the mothers are able to answer intelligibly, something of value will turn up, I'm sure, in the way of "data." For in time, I suppose, they will call them "data"—these matters now known only to mothers and those to whom the path leads with such dear secrecy—no more than where a child's feet have pressed down the meadow-grass on its way to the woods. But mothers are oddly reticent upon these matters. There is a precedent. "And she hid these things in her heart."

At Tommy's door the sleepy nurse, with that fine, ironic edge upon her good-nature which meets over-anxious mothers at every turn of their anguished journey through the small, terrible years, told me, yawning, that my son's temperature was normal, and as I stood dumb and waiting, irritating her, no doubt, by the same look in my eyes that you can see any day in those of a cat or dog mother, she went on impressively: "And his pulse—*and* his respiration. He's perfectly all right, and he's a dear. I don't wonder you're crazy about him."

She went to her room, wiping her eyes, while I took my place as day nurse.

The children's pet play-place that spring was in the thick lilac hedges bordering the farther side of the curving drive that led up from the street. They were old bushes, making even at their base a six-foot-wide jungle within which were spaces too small for a grown-up's entrance; but the children moved about in it easily, even making small clearings and bowers by pressing down the young growth, and hovered there with their toys, mysteriously, like birds upon the nest. I looked in upon them occasionally, but with an awkward and intrusive feeling, for the most part contenting myself with the near exile of my window, whence I could follow in a clumsy way the swift veering of their fancy, and watch like any jungle creature when its young are at play. For there is something feral about even a human mother, something dangerous that has never answered to the taming forces of civilization. Old Puss, the other day, flung herself with valiant hopelessness into the jaws of a bull-dog, and afterward we

found her kitten untouched but for a splash of its mother's blood upon its white fur. Curious instinct! I don't know just how the philosophers of the microscope account for it—but Puss and I, we understand!

So as I sat at the window with my embroidery not much escaped me. And yet I continually felt that there was something in their play that was strange, as if, when my eyes were wholly upon my work, I half saw something among the bushes that did not appear when I leaned back and stared with full attention. But I realized that I had not yet recovered fully from Tommy's illness. Those things drain you of blood and of years and leave a strangeness. He was recovering finely, but I still felt the need of rest.

We had received word that an old school friend of mine would visit us hurriedly on her way to a long stay abroad. I pondered this with a kind of terror, looking at my own children with a feeling almost of guilt. Almost I wondered whether she could have forgotten, in the confusion of her own enormous trouble, that I had children—that my Martha was of the same age her own little girl had been. Examining my own endurance shudderingly, I seemed to see that in her place I should flee from children's voices as from arrows; then, remembering nature's processes, I considered that perhaps there might be some anodyne of which I was ignorant, some merciful dulling of the senses. For women are always being surprised by themselves, by some store of strength, just when they think they are failing, some lightning knowledge, some unsuspected capacity. So I waited, dreading and wondering.

My husband was to meet her at the station. The odor of the lilacs was almost overpowering. It was their best day. But I dropped my sewing and clenched my hands while I felt the carriage coming nearer through the village street, and the children, among the lilacs, grew wilder and wilder, pulling down the flowers in wanton heaps and throwing them about with frantic laughter. I was just condemning myself bitterly for not having sent them away for the day when the carriage turned into the drive.



Drawn by Denman Fink

Engraved by F. A. Pettit

"WHAT CHILD WAS THAT PLAYING WITH YOURS?" SHE ASKED

It stopped suddenly opposite where the children were at play, and I saw her get out—so quickly that Henry could not help her—run toward them with her arms out—then stop short, her hands clasped to her heart. I was afraid that she might frighten them in some way. That was my first thought—not for her. And, weak as I was, I ran out.

Henry, scared and wretched, was looking at me over her head. Then she turned toward me, and in her pitiful, careless black (she who had used to be so gay in color and expression) her face was as if dead, only for the eyes; they were terrible and burning.

"What child was that playing with yours?" she asked.

She spoke at first in a whisper, as though afraid some one might overhear. Then, as I hesitated, she caught me by the arm, crying out the question in a dreadful way: "*What* child? She ran away! Where did she go?"

I put my arm about her. "Hush!" I said. "You mustn't frighten the babies. There wasn't any one with them. I've been watching them all the afternoon; they've been playing just with each other." I turned to Martha. "There wasn't anybody with you and Tommy, was there, dear?" I asked.

But the unsatisfactory little thing only ducked her head into my gown and looked up sidewise at my poor friend with a funny, confidential smile, as though in some odd way they had an understanding in common. The children seemed to have no perception whatever of any tragedy.

Tommy stood with his thin little legs apart, his hands behind him, and his head judicially on one side. Plainly, he approved of her.

She knelt at his baby feet. "Who was it?" she pleaded, and she had got hold of her voice so that it was as soft as if she were speaking to her own child. "Who was with you, dear?"

And he piped up—that clear, thrilly little voice—"Jes' on'y Cara."

She rose to her feet then, crushing her arms over her breast as women do when they are feeling the emptiness where once there was so much. Her face! She seemed to be looking through—beyond—and the terribleness fell away like a mask.

"Cara!" she whispered, "Beloved!" Then she fell, stretched out right at my children's feet.

They weren't frightened. They just went back to their jungle and calmly watched us while we got her to the house. I heard Martha say, "That's Cara's mother," as they began to be busy with the lilacs again. What did they know? What *did* they know?

They never spoke of Cara again in their play. I kept listening and expecting. Weeks afterward I screwed up my courage to a question, but was met by a sweet, blank stare. Tommy said nothing at all, but met my eyes very steadily. But Martha, after what seemed an obliging effort to remember, patronizingly explained that they hadn't played *that* for ever so long. They were building fairy cities now, and although much, very much, had been accomplished, there was still so much to do that they wouldn't be able to think of anything else for a long time—maybe a million years.

My friend made a slow convalescence with us that summer instead of keeping on with that wild flight from her sorrow. She believed that she had seen. But it was all so inchoate—such a jumble of children's pretense mixed inextricably with what we tremblingly believed we had seen for ourselves. We did not dare accept it—yet we did!

We agreed that they might have chanced upon her child's quaint pet name in the course of their constant manufacture of queer words. Then, too, there was the possibility that the third in the lilac-bush that day had, after all, been a neighbor's child: some little creature that I should not have cared to have jostling unsanitary elbows against my own children's protected cleanliness. Tommy's clear-eyed truthfulness—"Jes' on'y Cara," precluded that. Of course, too, the children were perfectly able to run about so fast that only a practised eye could be sure whether there were three or two of them. But neither of us convinced herself or the other by these explanations. We went through them for form's sake and out of respect to the logic in which we had been trained. *She* had seen—as briefly as by lightning, but as clearly—that which she had seen. And I had had my dream.